

Program Motivates Parishioners in Cheraw to Get Active

Issue

When the pastor of Fisher Hill Community Baptist Church, Rev. Johnny McClendon, retired from the military, he continued to be physically active. But when he looked out among his congregation on Sunday mornings, he recognized there were many suffering from poor lifestyle choices, obesity, and that their health was at risk. He realized positive changes were needed in Cheraw, South Carolina.

In Chesterfield County, 30 percent of the population is completely sedentary and 48 percent report being overweight. The prevalence of hypertension is 33.4 percent in Chesterfield County, which is higher than the state rate of 28.8 percent. According to 2004 national statistics, the overall economic burden of illness was higher for hypertension (\$392 per person), than for heart disease (\$368 per person), or arthritis (\$327 per person). There are over 700 churches in the county, which reach populations many times underserved by healthcare providers.

Intervention

The South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control saw a need to help Rev. McClendon and his congregation. Thanks to staff time from the Preventive Health/Health Services Block Grant and staff time and funds from the SC Cardiovascular Health Program grant, Fisher Hill Community Baptist Church was able to participate in the American Heart Association's *Search Your Heart* Program. Because of this program and the enthusiasm of this church, the congregation is now being educated on the risks, signs, and symptoms of heart disease, diabetes, and stroke, as well as lifestyle behavior improvements such as increased physical activity and proper nutrition.

During 2005, Fisher Hill Community Baptist Church has:

- Started regular aerobics classes (twice per week) in its Life Center;
- Marked a quarter-mile walking trail around the perimeter of its Church and Life Center;
- Incorporated healthy meals into church gatherings; and
- Held educational sessions at least once per month for six months for church members on various topics including stress, the impact of nutrition and physical activity on health, stroke prevention, and health advocacy.

Largely due to their participation in this program, Fisher Hill Community Baptist Church was awarded the 2005 Dennis Milton Community Health Award at the Second Annual Chesterfield County Interfaith Health Conference.

Impact

At Fisher Hill Community Baptist Church, parishioners are now excited about practicing healthier behaviors. Rev. McClendon preaches that the body is God's temple and therefore must be respected and treated well. He encourages each of his church members to participate in the health activities of this church. A health committee has been formed and implements programs to address the health needs of their church family. So far, Fisher Hill Community Baptist Church has impacted its community by:

- Screening 47 church members for cardiovascular disease and its risk factors;
- Referring members as needed to local health care providers; and
- Challenging other churches in the area to address health and lifestyle behaviors.

Future plans include making its health programs available to community members who are not members of the church.

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